Public Meeting
High Speed Rail Feasibility and Planning Study
Concord, New Hampshire
February 12, 2002

A public meeting to discuss the Boston to Montreal High Speed Rail feasibility and planning study was held on February 12, 2002 at the New Hampshire Department of Transportation's (NHDOT) John O. Morton Building on Hazen Drive in Concord, New Hampshire. Members of the public attending the meeting included regional planners, legislators, transit advocates, and interested citizens. Christopher Morgan of the NHDOT, and Scott Bascom of the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) were at the meeting representing their state's participation in the study. Carol Murray, Commissioner of the NHDOT, also participated in the meeting.

Prior to the formal presentation, an open house welcomed the public providing them with the opportunity to view informative displays and study materials, meet the study team, and discuss the study with team members.

The study's project manager, Ron O'Blenis of Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc. (PB), opened the meeting welcoming those in attendance. PB is the lead firm providing planning services for the study.

Mr. O'Blenis introduced Scott Bascom, project manager for VTrans and Steering Committee representative. Mr. Bascom provided a description of the study's partnership between Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont as well as their coordination with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). He also described the financing of the study, with half of the $400,000 cost being funded by the FRA and the remaining $200,000 being paid by an equal split between the three states.

Carol Murray was then introduced by Mr. O'Blenis. Commissioner Murray indicated that she is excited about this study because it has prompted the three states to begin discussing how to meet future transportation needs. She commented, "For too long we've been reactive to transportation and mobility needs; now we're going to be proactive." She indicated that the goal is to think, act, and plan cooperatively and collaboratively in order to be poised for the future, and that success will be the end result only if there is public outreach and input.

Mr. O'Blenis moderated the remainder of the meeting. He began his presentation by stressing the public's ownership of the future corridor. He indicated that a key

component of the study was to involve those people who will be using the service. He emphasized that the public will participate in deciding if this concept is a good idea.

Mr. O'Blenis then invited participation from the audience. He asked the attendees to provide their definition of "high speed rail." Responses included:

- Acela
- 100 miles per hour and on time
- 75 miles per hour between Boston and Montreal
- bullet train
- 120 miles per hour
- at least 120 miles per hour, more than one or two trains per day
- competitive with Amtrak
- safe corridor
- faster than an automobile between its origin and destination

Mr. O'Blenis informed the participants that all of their answers fit the definition of high speed rail. He referenced the definition of high speed rail as shown on the study website:

> *High-speed rail (HSR) is self-guided intercity passenger ground transportation that is time-competitive with air and/or auto on a door-to-door basis for trips in the approximate range of 100 to 500 miles. This is a market-based, not a speed-based, definition: it recognizes that the opportunities and requirements for HSR differ markedly among different pairs of cities.*

Mr. O'Blenis stated that based on this definition, each of the answers provided by the public was correct.

Mr. O'Blenis said the Federal Railroad Administration may have designated the Boston/Montreal route as a high speed rail corridor but the service would have to be justified to get funded. He identified the main task of Phase I of the feasibility study to be determining potential ridership. Mr. O'Blenis then invited the audience to provide feedback on how best to evaluate ridership including the role that frequency of service will have on the results. Some of the comments regarding what will be important in this evaluation included:

- Connection to airports
- High frequency
- Reliable, on time service, and good food - speed is irrelevant

- Remember storm clients - the Northeast Corridor has standing room only during bad weather

Mr. O'Blenis then gave an overview of the study including the ridership estimation and the train performance calculation (TPC) model. He described the methodology in the study to assess ridership. He explained that a ridership model will be developed by Cambridge Systematics, Inc. (CS) with variables including frequency and timing of trains as well as cost. He indicated that CS will conduct surveys at bus stations, airports and the Hooksett, NH toll booths to determine existing travel patterns along the corridor

Mr. O'Blenis then described the TPC model. He indicated that the model would be looking at several factors - track conditions, number of stations, existing curvature - in an effort to balance infrastructure needs with speed desires. He explained that the tracks between Boston and Lowell, MA were in good shape and improvements from Lowell to Nashua, NH would be made when the commuter line is extended to southern New Hampshire. He also indicated that track conditions between Manchester and Concord need improvement, that no track, only right-of-way, exists from Boscawen (north of Concord) to Lebanon, and that from White River Junction to Montreal an Amtrak rail line already exists.

Mr. O'Blenis discussed the study's objectives in defining institutional issues, safety issues, customs, grade crossings, opportunities for multiple use and international cooperation. He indicated that the FRA requires that the study include communication with the Canadian side. He indicated that one conclusion of the study may be that the corridor is not suitable for high speed rail.

Mr. O'Blenis explained that to proceed with this study beyond Phase I will require the cooperation of the three states and Canada, and that the FRA would require a unanimous decision by all parties to move forward. Regarding issues with customs and grade crossing, State Legislator Larry Guay, organizer of the New Hampshire/Canadian Trade Council, offered his group's help in getting agreements worked out between the two countries. Mr. Guay suggested one way to avoid long delays at the border was to put the customs office in Montreal's Central Station, not at the border. Another suggestion was for the study team to look at how efficiently the border crossing operates with the existing Amtrak service that cross the border in New York and Vancouver.

In general, discussion in the audience favored the implementation of high speed rail in the corridor. A suggestion by one participant was for the team to look at the reasons why the South Shore Line established in South Bend, Indiana in 1927 was successful.

One participant said the high speed rail study did not seem to be addressing the need to connect easily to the area's main airports in Manchester and Boston. To serve as a transporter to the airports, the reactivation of the Salem rail corridor was proposed and the team was encouraged to follow that model.

The study team was asked why the system couldn't be designed to have frequent service, even with shorter distances, e.g., Lowell to Concord or Montreal to Burlington? Another participant pointed out the value of trains along the Northeast corridor during snowstorms. This person indicated that when cars and planes are stopped, the trains still run and are packed with standing room only customers. One member of the audience who had been stranded on a train headed to Boston's South Station disputed the reliability of trains during storms.

One participant asked if the Environmental Protection Agency would require clean up of the right of way. Mr. O'Blenis indicated that an environmental review would be required.

Mr. O'Blenis was asked if the study team was looking at passenger service independent of freight. He indicated that while there may be opportunities to share the costs of the right of way with freight, Phase I of the study will not be addressing the needs of freight.

Robert Ward of Andover, NH asked Mr. O'Blenis, "How do you define feasibility? Is there not a public responsibility to provide safe, reliable alternatives to the transportation options we have now?" He also pointed out that when calculating feasibility, the team ought to assign value to public purpose and the fact that trains provide a means to travel when gas is either too expensive or unavailable and for traveling during bad weather.

Commissioner Murray indicated that she knows that high speed rail is technically feasible, but realizes that it has to be economically feasible as well. She said some of the issues with trains could include their potential to create sprawl, and pollution. She said experience with the Nashua lines indicated that there may be objections to the location of stations in people's back yards.

Mr. O'Blenis commented that feasibility will include "…does the public support it?"

Peter Griffin, President of the NH Railroad Revitalization Association, said that people, including public officials, must be educated to think of transportation improvements as more than adding another lane to the interstate. He believes that funding a transportation system that is intermodal is important.

One participant indicated that the impact of high speed rail on property owners living next to the corridor is less than it would be for commuter rail because there would be fewer trains.

There was some discussion about the economic value of trains. One comment made was that history has taught us that whatever community the railroad passed through, it brought prosperity. Another participant said that a recent study of the economic impact of the coastal Maine train route indicated for every $1 invested in the train, $4 in economic benefit has been returned.

Mr. O'Blenis was asked about the safety record of high speed rail. He responded that experience in the United States, although limited, and the record for high speed rail in Europe and Japan has been very good.

A participant asked when the team would report back to the public. Mr. O'Blenis indicated that the team will be ready to report its findings to the public by early September 2002.

The meeting was then closed by Mr. O'Blenis, with the invitation to continue the discussion with the team if the public had more questions and comments. Many attendees took advantage of the offer. Mr. O'Blenis also reminded those present to keep informed on the study and provide feedback to the team via the study's website, www.bostonmontrealhsr.org.

To read a more detailed summary of the other regional meetings use the links below.

- Overall Summary
- Lowell, Massachusetts
- Concord, New Hampshire
- Montpelier, Vermont